

Where does that pesky, little comma go?

By Stacey Herman, staff writer
Office of Communications

(EDITOR'S NOTE: **Business communications has never been more complicated - Cell phones, video conferencing, e-mails, web content, correspondence, reports and presentations cause even the greatest writer or orator to stir with apprehension that their message is clearly understood. Each month this column will explore the many different ways each of us can learn to communicate more plainly.**)

I admit it. I have to get out my grammar and writing books at least once a year and do my own little imposed "refresher" course on grammar, punctuation and spelling. You would think that all of this information would be firmly committed to my memory, especially after years of publication and writing work. Well.... my brain still gets fuzzy from time to time, especially when it comes to commas. Some confusion stems from seeing commas incorrectly used on a regular basis. Over time, I can't always remember the proper way to use a comma. So, for my benefit and yours, let's do a group "refresher" course on commas. There will be a quiz at the end, so pay attention!

The rules:

Use a comma to set off a direct quote. The comma goes inside the quote mark.

- *"This is the most delicious pizza I have ever tasted," said Beverly.*

Use commas to set off transitional and introductory phrases.

- *They ordered chocolate pie for dessert, however, no one ate it.*
- *Before we begin, let's go around the room and introduce our guests today.*
- *Because it was snowing, I ate lunch at my desk.*

Use commas to set off tag questions, a yes/no comment and interjections.

- *Yes, you can have the last slice of pepperoni pizza.*
- *Rufus, have you been digging in the flower garden again?*
- *So, what do you want to do this weekend?*
- *I must point out, Ron, that you missed the deadline.*

Use a comma before a coordinating conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).

- *She worked late, for she had a presentation to make the next morning.*
- *He won the lottery, but was reluctant to tell anyone.*
- *Mike played the drums all night, so she got very little sleep.*

Use commas to separate items in a series. Do not use a comma before the last item in the series unless the series wordy.

- *Aunt Sue brought chips, dip and relishes to the party.*
- *Billy went shopping for a tux to wear to the prom, a new stereo for his car, and a necklace to give his mother for her birthday.*

Use a comma to separate coordinating adjectives.

- *We donated the old, plaid sofa to charity.*

Use commas to set off two independent clauses. Use a comma if each clause has an expressed subject and verb and can stand-alone.

- *I went home for the day, and she went back to class.*
- *The remodeling project was complete, and the house was ready to sell.*

Use commas to set-off non-essential phrases (information that is not necessary to the reader).

- *I decided to go to Seattle, my mother's hometown, for the summer.*

Comma use with "that" and "which" can be confusing. Use "that" when referring to an essential clause and "which" for non-essential clauses. Usually, "that" is not surrounded by commas and "which" is surrounded by commas.

- *I remember the day that we brought you home from the hospital.*
- *The bowling team, which took second place in the tournament last weekend, is in first place.*

Never use a comma to separate a subject and verb.

- *The woman at the counter, is the person I am supposed to meet. (Wrong)*
- *The woman at the counter is the person I am supposed to meet. (Right)*

Use a comma to separate similar words.

- *All we know is, is that she should have received the package yesterday.*

Use a comma in numbers larger than 999.

- *There are 1,289 people participating in the event.*

Use a comma to separate the date from the year. Do not use a comma to separate a month and year.

- *They were married on January 1, 2006.*
- *They were married in January 2006.*

Use commas to set off ages, political affiliations, degrees and hometowns.

- *Malory Jamison, 48, died after a prolonged illness.*
- *Henry Smith, Lawrence, will share his thoughts about the proposed highway.*

Use commas to separate a name from a title when the title follows the name.

- *Joe Walker, the director of public works, resigned last Friday.*
- *Novelist Wanda Smith autographed my book at the library.*

Use a semicolon when linking two independent clauses with no connecting words (and, but, for or, nor, so, yet). Use comma if a connecting word is present.

- *I bought a compact car, for it is more efficient.*
- *I bought a compact car; it is more efficient.*

Use semicolons if a series of items is long or if there are commas within the series.

- *Maria took her dog for a walk after work; dropped off her new, blue suit at the drycleaners; and stopped by the grocery store to buy ice cream, cake, balloons and candles for the birthday party.*

QUIZ

Review the sentences below and insert commas (and semicolons) where appropriate. Turn your answers, along with your name, office phone and e-mail address, into the Office of the Secretary front desk by noon, Monday, April 10 for a prize drawing. Answers will be printed in the May newsletter.

1. In the 1970s I liked to watch The Brady Bunch Fantasy Island and Love Boat on television every week.
2. "I made the cake from my grandmother's recipe" said Susie.
3. Hey are you going to the party tonight?
4. They went on a cruise but didn't have a good time because of the weather.
5. If you insist on going for a walk David you should take an umbrella.
6. They bought enough food to serve 20 people however only 15 attended the event.
7. The café served an assortment of fresh homemade cookies pies and cakes.
8. Kelly Sherwood Wamego is the new choir director at the high school.
9. Screenwriter Jeremy Watts penned a fast-paced high-drama thriller.
10. I loaded up the car for the trip it was almost time to leave.

11. Wilma Simmons 62 retired after 30 years as a receptionist at the water office.
12. We have more than 1000 reams of paper in the warehouse.
13. The house at 1528 Redbud Lane a fine example of architecture is on the home tour.
14. Marcus packed his khaki cargo pants three Hawaiian print button-down shirts and one pair of brown leather sandals for the trip.
15. Her birthday is March 12 1970. In September 2006 they will celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary.

Good Luck!